

The Merry Widow

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

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CHAPTER II. Old Love and New.

"WELL, here I am," announced a tall, slender youth, entering the deserted salon a few minutes later with Nish at his side. "I'm here at my country's call, all right, but my confounded country doesn't seem to be on hand to meet me."

His graceful walk was not wholly steady, and there was a flush on the handsome young face. The late arrival was Prince Danilo of Marsovia, attache of the Marsovian legation at Paris. As a diplomat he had scarcely scored a success, for he had a delightfully normal aversion to work and a simple, unflinching joy in the amusements of Maxim's and his clubs.

"I'll hunt up his excellency at once,"

For a few minutes no sound was audible in the empty salon save the distant swell and fall of dance music, punctuated by the slumbrous prince's heavy breathing.

Then Natalie hurried in with De Joldon. Both looked anxious.

"How careless of me!" the ambassador's wife was exclaiming. "Where can I have dropped the miserable fan? If my husband should pick it up and find on it those words you were foolish enough to write— I wonder if I left it in the niche on the stairs when we were sitting there. Let's go back and see."

They turned back, almost colliding with Sonia, who was entering, Cascada directly behind her.

"Oh, Mme. Sadowa," asked Natalie, "you haven't seen anything of a white ivory fan? I've looked everywhere, and—"

"No," replied the widow, "but I'll look in this room if you haven't made a thorough search here already."

Natalie, thanking her, hurried back with her cavalier to the stairway. Sonia idly began her search, but Cascada interrupted her.



THE LATE ARRIVAL WAS PRINCE DANILO.

Nish was assuring the prince. "Are—are you quite in condition to see him, if I may?"

"Oh, I'm all right enough," yawned Danilo, "only I forgot to go to bed last night. If I could reel off a few yards of sleep!"

"Perhaps I could find you some place to—"

"I'd prefer a desk, if you can find one. I always sleep best at my desk. But I suppose—"

"There is a couch, sir, over in the corner behind the palms. How would that do? You could get a nice nap there, and in a little while I'd find his excellency for you. But, sir, if I may say so, why do you waste your life in dissipation when you might marry and settle down? Just think, now! Would not a dear little wife and a home of your own be better worth while than all your clubs? I leave it to you!"

"You leave it to me?" retorted Danilo. "Then I make it clubs."

"But, if I may say so—"

"You may not," interrupted Danilo, crossing to the couch and throwing himself at full length among its cushions. "By by! If you're waking, call me early!"

He spread a handkerchief over his face and in a moment was sound asleep, leaving Nish to tiptoe out in search of Popoff.

"That can wait," he pleaded, "but I cannot. Won't you hear me?"

"Certainly," assented Sonia cheerfully. "You are going to propose, aren't you?"

"Ah, you read my secret!"

"It required little cleverness. You men are all alike."

"But no man ever before loved as I love!" protested Cascada, his voice unconsciously rising in his emotion. "You are all the world to me. Until I met you I never thought I could!"

"Ring off!" grumbled Danilo in his sleep, vaguely bothered by the loud voice.

Sonia started.

"Some one is here!" she whispered, pointing toward the hidden couch.

"You are mistaken," contradicted Cascada, "and even if it were so I am willing for all the world to know how I—"

A long, blissful, sonorous snore from the couch.

Sonia laughed, her eyes alight with amusement.

"Snoring and romance don't go well together, marquis," she observed, "and as the snoring doesn't seem likely to stop the romance must. You say you are in love with me, and I know you are in love with my fortune. Good-by."

"You misjudge me cruelly," Cascada

protested.

"Oh, no, I don't! Men are all alike. Goodby."

As the discomfited marquis made his way wrathfully from the room Sonia mischievously crept across to the couch. There lay the man, sound asleep, his face still covered by the handkerchief. Sonia touched his hair.

"Scat!" roared Danilo, giving his head a shake that let the handkerchief fall from his face.

"Danilo!" gasped the widow, starting back.

At sound of his name the prince sat up, dazed and blinking. His wandering eyes fell on the woman, and, with an exclamation of utter amazement, he stumbled to his feet and stood staring incredulously at her.

"Sonia!" he exclaimed. "Sonia!"

Then, recovering himself, he bowed stiffly and said:

"I beg your pardon, madame."

"No; I beg yours," she replied. "Pray go on snoring."

"You don't remember me?" he asked, surprised.

"Not in the very least," she answered, moving away.

"Yet you called my name."

"You were asleep then. That was different."

"And now I am awake—to the joy of seeing you again."

"The joy is all your own. Is it so surprising to find me in Paris? I am here enjoying my wealth—and freedom!"

"I congratulate you on both, especially the freedom."

"Yes, freedom is one of your fads, I believe," remarked Sonia, "especially freedom from marriage. Do you still make a habit of avoiding marriage—at the last moment?"

"Sonia, you are unjust. If it had rested with me you should be my wife now, not another man's widow."

"If it rested with you?" she mimicked. "Well, let the whole story rest now. It's forgotten."

"By you, perhaps—never by me."

"Oh, no! I remember it every now and then for my own amusement. But it is hard to think of myself as the little Marsovian peasant maid to whom the dashing cavalier officer, Prince Danilo, was once engaged and whom his rich old uncle at the last moment forbade to marry because of her poverty. How differently that same rich old uncle would look on the match today! Twenty millions is a pretty dowry."

"At least it seems you didn't break your heart over losing me," sneered Danilo.

"No; my plebeian heart stood the shock excellently. I soon found consolation—an elderly husband who lived just one week after the wedding and left me all his wealth."

"Yes; I heard how your father forced you into the match. Next time you can choose a husband to suit yourself."

"Why should I marry again? I am

rich, free. I have everything!"

"Including love?" he asked, his eyes devouring her fragile beauty.

"I don't believe in love," scoffed Sonia. "All men are alike. Dozens of them are after my money and make love to me because they can't get it without me."

"Men are not all fortune hunters," he denied hotly. "I for one!"

"So they all say. Each says 'I love you!' Each means my fortune."

"They do?" cried Danilo, in rage at the strong insinuation. "Well, here's one that doesn't. I for one shall never say to you, 'I love you!'"

A strange smile stole across her face.



"NEVER! NEVER! NEVER!"

She came very close to where he stood; so close that the faint perfume of her hair was sweet in his nostrils; so close that her breath was warm upon his lips; so close that his bewildered soul struggled in vain to hide from the glory in her eyes. Her voice was a musical whisper as she asked:

"You'll never say to me 'I love you'?"

There was an infinity of allurements in the tempting words. Danilo, with a mighty effort, shook off the spell and shouted:

"Never! Never! Never!"

"That's a comfort!" she said coldly, drawing away and seeking to veil her keen disappointment. "But," she added more softly, "why not say it if you really want to?"

"I don't want to!" he declared sulkily.

"And you promise faithfully you'll never say to me, 'I love you'?"

Again she was perilously close to him. Again his eyes tore themselves free from the pleading seductiveness of hers as he reiterated:

"I promise! I'm not going to make a fool of myself or be made a fool of."

"Is that a declaration of war?" queried Sonia.

"No—of friendship. Do you mean to say if I asked you to be my wife you would merely laugh at me?"

"Probably. All men are alike."

"They are not; and in time I'll prove it to you."

Before she could answer the ambassador and several of the guests came into the room. At first opportunity Popoff drew Danilo aside.

"Prince," said he impressively, "you have now been attached to this legation nearly four months and—"

"Few of my attachments last so long," observed Danilo.

"You refer to your love affairs? I have heard of them. They have brought you to the brink of ruin. You are almost penniless. Here is my plan to save you, also to give you a chance to save your country from bankruptcy. I want you to marry."

"To what?" cried Danilo.

"To marry—beautiful woman, my boy—twenty millions—Mme. Sonia Sadowa! Hey?"

"Never!" returned Danilo, angrily, as he rose to end the interview.

"Then a Frenchman will marry her, and her fortune and our country will be ruined."

"I won't marry her," repeated Danilo, "and she won't marry me. But for my country's sake I'll keep any Frenchman from marrying her."

"But how?"

"You shall see!"



(To be continued)

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